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LOCAL KNOWLEDGE, LOCAL LEARNING AND PREDICTING ELECTION OUTCOMES: VOTER ASSESSMENTS OF LIKELY PARTY SUCCESS IN SCOTLAND'S CONSTITUENCIES AT THE 2015 AND 2017 GENERAL ELECTIONS

Ron Johnston, Charles Pattie and Todd K. Hartman

Abstract

Political scientists often debate how much information people have and deploy when making electoral decisions. Some scholars suggest that voters are aware of which party is likely to win in their local constituency at British general elections; however, this might not be the case in situations when there is substantial and spatially varying change in the relative fortunes of two or more parties between elections. That argument is evaluated here using as a case study the 2015 and 2017 general elections in Scotland: at the first, the SNP's vote share more than doubled, and it won 56 of the country's 59 seats, having won just six at the previous contest; at the second, its vote share fell by about a third, and it lost 21 of those 56 seats. Analysis of British Election Survey data collected before and during the campaigns preceding those elections shows that most respondents were aware of the SNP's surge in 2015 and expected their victory in every constituency. In 2017, most voters were aware which of the SNP's three competitors was the biggest threat in each constituency, and that awareness became clearer during the campaign; yet, voters – especially those who identified with the SNP and were contacted by it during the campaign – still (incorrectly) anticipated a local SNP victory.

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An underlying assumption of voting behaviour studies is that the electorate is composed of rational individuals who make decisions on the basis of substantial volumes of information gleaned during the campaign (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Merrill and Grofman 1999; Himmelweit *et al.*, 1981; Rose and McAllister, 1990). Voters process the information in terms of costs and benefits and then make informed choices – whether to vote at a general election, for example, and, if so, for which party and/or candidate. Yet, some scholars argue that voters have neither the time nor the inclination to assemble and then evaluate large bodies of information; instead, they use heuristics – such as their opinions of party leaders – as short-cuts to decision-making (Fiorina, 1981; Sniderman *et al.*, 1991; Clarke *et al.*, 2009; Green and Jennings, 2017). Even so, voters need some information on which to operate. This model of decision-making has been strongly criticised by Achen and Bartels (2016: 277) who stress ‘the sheer magnitude of most people’s ignorance about politics’. So how much do people really know about their local electoral situation, and what do they learn during the campaign?

In electoral systems such as that used for general elections in the United Kingdom two considerations are relevant to most voters. The first concerns the political parties, which seek to get as many MPs as possible elected so that they can influence government formation and subsequent policy development – as a majority government, as members of a coalition or other inter-party agreement, or as an opposition holding a government to account. In this context, potential voters evaluate the parties and their policy proposals – many using heuristics such as their opinions of the party leaders – on which the national campaigns increasingly focus. At the 2017 UK General Election, for example, many electors are reported to have told canvassers that they approved of the Labour party’s policies but could not vote for it because they believed its leader, Jeremy Corbyn, was not a credible Prime Minister (Ross and McTague, 2017; Shipman, 2017).

The second consideration concerns the context in their local constituency. At most UK general elections the outcome in many constituencies is almost certain long before the votes are canvassed, let alone cast and counted. These safe seats occur where one of the parties had such a substantial majority over the others at the previous contest that a change in incumbency is extremely doubtful save a major shift in public opinion. In such constituencies, some voters – especially those with little interest in the election outcome and for

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whom voting does not evoke a strong sense of civic duty – may decide not to bother to vote. In safe seats, even the parties are unlikely to expend valuable resources to canvass their support (Denver and Hands, 1997). If electors believe that the seat where they live is marginal, on the other hand, and think that their vote could make a difference to the outcome, they are more likely not only to vote but also to consider the option carefully and come to a reasoned decision regarding which party/candidate to support (Denver and Hands, 1985; Downs 1957, Pattie and Johnston, 1998). In such situations, too, the parties with a chance of winning the seat are likely to canvass support there, providing information regarding the nature of the local contest, on which voters may base their decisions.

But how accurate is voters' local knowledge about the situation in their home constituency? Do they believe that the seat is safe for one of the parties, or do they think that two (or more) parties have a chance of victory? And do those beliefs become more accurate as voters are provided with information during the campaign?

There is a growing literature, originating in the United States (e.g. Lewis-Beck and Skalahan, 1989), exploring what has become known as 'citizen forecasting' that uses survey instruments inquiring which party/candidate respondents believe will win in their home district/constituency. Graefe (2014) has shown that citizens provide some of the most accurate estimates in forecasting American presidential election results, and more recent analyses indicate that the larger the group surveyed (e.g. aggregated by a US state) or the greater its members' ability (e.g. measured by the higher their educational qualifications), the better the forecasts (Murr, 2015). Comparable work in Germany has shown that better forecasts are provided by individuals in large social networks containing considerable political expertise and which involve substantial political discussion (Leiter et al., 2018) – although Belgian data suggest that individuals with partisan attachments are more likely to over-estimate their party's chances of success (Stiers and Dassonneville, 2018).

Work on citizen forecasting has also been extended to Great Britain. The British Election Study (BES) surveys have regularly asked respondents questions regarding each of the main parties' chances of success in their local constituency. In most cases this was a binary question – for example, 'which party has the best chance of winning?' Murr (2011, 2015) has analysed the responses, concluding that most electors were accurate in their expectations, and he has used these expectations to forecast the outcome in each seat (see also Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2011). In some ways this accuracy is unsurprising, given – as noted above – that most seats at most elections are considered safe for one of the parties (see Curtice, 2018, on the declining

number of marginal seats over the last half-century). Of more interest is how accurate their perceptions are in the marginal constituencies, especially when there is considerable change in the relative popularity of each party between elections, and also whether those perceptions change during the campaign.

Using survey data from the BES, we analyse evaluations of each party's likelihood of winning at the 2015 and 2017 UK general elections in Scotland's 59 constituencies to: (1) identify whether voters' assessments of each party's chances of victory in their home constituency reflected either (or both) of its positions at the preceding election and the outcome of the next; and (2) determine whether those assessments changed during the election campaign, and whether any such changes were linked to the parties canvassing of their support. The results allow an overall evaluation of the extent of voter knowledge of two, substantially changing, electoral situations – could they accurately predict which party would win in their home constituency? For the 2015 election, the analyses focus on the surge in support for the SNP; for the 2017 election, they address not only the SNP's decline in support but also the relative advance of each of the other three parties. These data show that local voters were generally well aware of the SNP's prospects in their home constituencies, especially among those who were more interested in politics, those who identified with the party, and those canvassed for support during the last weeks of the campaign.

Scotland as a case study

Scotland provides an excellent case study to investigate the accuracy of voter expectations. At previous elections very few of its constituencies were marginal, but between 2010 and 2015 there was a substantial surge in support for the Scottish National Party (SNP), followed by a significant decline at the next election only two years later. In 2010, the SNP won 20 per cent of the votes cast in Scotland and just six of the 59 seats; at the next election in 2015 the SNP's vote share increased to 50 per cent, and it won all but three of the seats – even over-turning majorities against it of 40 percentage points or more in 10 constituencies (all of them won by Labour in 2010) – and by between 30–40 points in a further 15 constituencies. At the 2017 election the SNP's vote share fell to 36.9 per cent, and it lost 21 of the seats won just two years previously: its share of the votes cast fell by more than 15 percentage points in 26 of the seats. Alongside these substantial, and spatially varying, changes in SNP support between 2015 and 2017 were major shifts in support for the other three parties that contested all 59 seats at each of the elections.

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The Conservative share fell (very slightly) in just one constituency, for example, and increased by 12 points or more (to a maximum of 29) in half of the seats; Labour's decline in mean vote share across the 59 seats was 17.8 percentage points between 2010 and 2015 (when it was defeated in 40 of the 41 seats won in 2010): between 2015 and 2017 its vote share declined again in 13 but increased by over 5 points (to a maximum of 12) in a further 22 constituencies. The Liberal Democrats also lost support (by as much as 21 points) in 11 seats between 2015 and 2017. In short, almost every Scottish constituency experienced substantial changes in support for at least two of the four political parties at both of those elections.

Building on its seven years as the leading party in the Scottish Parliament (Mitchell et al., 2011) and mobilisation of a very substantial minority of the electorate during its campaign for a 'yes' vote in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence (McCrone, 2017), a surge in support for the SNP was widely anticipated and much discussed in the media well before the 2015 election (Henderson and Mitchell, 2018). An opinion poll conducted in late April 2015 by Ipsos/MORI for the STV television channel suggested that the SNP would win 54 per cent of the votes if an election were held then, for example, while on the basis of that and other polls one month before the election it was estimated that the party would return between 38 and 54 of Scotland's 59 MPs. On election day (7 May) that estimate was refined to 52: the SNP won 56.¹

In April 2017 the Prime Minister called a snap general election, seeking to enhance the Conservative party's majority in the House of Commons to bolster support for her negotiations over the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, which had been formally announced a few weeks earlier. In Scotland much political debate followed that decision to withdraw, which had been opposed by a majority of voters there. It focused on whether, given Scottish voters' desire to retain EU membership, another independence referendum should be held; the Scottish Parliament voted in favour of this SNP proposal in March 2017.² This was strongly opposed by the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties and by a considerable proportion of the Scottish electorate. As a consequence the SNP's popularity fell; an initial interpretation was that the other three parties would split the anti-SNP vote in 2017, allowing it to retain most of its 2015 gains. But as the campaign proceeded a strong performance by the Conservatives and their leader, Ruth Davidson, suggested that they would benefit most from the shift as the party most likely to hold the line against another independence referendum (Henderson and Mitchell, 2018).

Further, as this Conservative revival became more apparent some potential Labour or Liberal Democrat supporters may have voted tactically to defeat the

SNP (as voters might also in seats where the other two parties were seen as the major contender). A March 2017 opinion poll, conducted before the unexpected general election was called, indicated that 47 per cent of respondents would vote for the SNP if there were a general election then, whereas just before polling day on 7 June another found that support had fallen to 40 per cent. Estimates of the SNP's likely tally of seats did not suggest a major shift, however: three weeks before polling day it was put at 45–54, and on polling day itself 43–54;³ both vote and seat shares were over-estimated. The decline in SNP support was spatially variable and benefited different parties across the 59 constituencies. In 2015 the SNP's advance was largely at Labour's expense: Labour won 42 per cent of the votes and 41 seats in 2010 but 24.3 per cent and just one seat in 2015, making only a small recovery in vote share (to 27.1 per cent) in 2017 but gaining six seats. The main advance in 2017 was by the Conservatives, whose vote share in 2010 and 2015 was 16.7 and 14.9 per cent respectively, on each occasion delivering just one Conservative MP; in 2017 their vote share almost doubled to 28.6 per cent, which delivered 13 MPs. The Liberal Democrats' vote share declined across the three elections – from 18.8 through 7.5 to 6.8 per cent; they won eleven seats in 2010, one in 2015, and four in 2017.

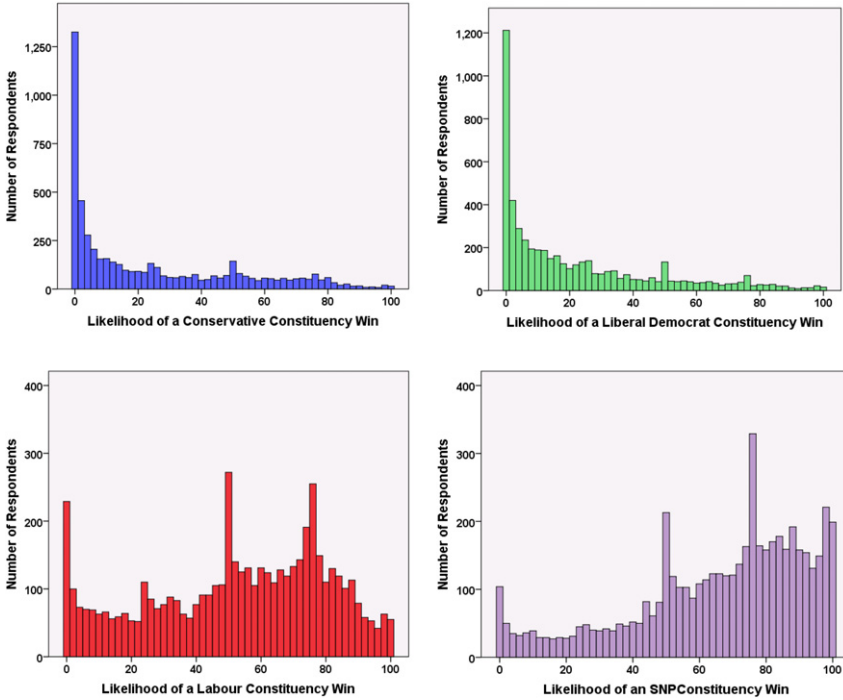
This volume of change in Scotland provides a valuable case study of the extent to which voters were aware of the parties' changing fortunes. Did they see the SNP landslide coming in their home constituencies in 2015, and two years later were they aware not only of the party's decline but also which seats it was most likely to lose? Further, did that awareness change during the campaign?

Measuring local expectations of victory

A new British Election Study (BES) Panel Survey of the British electorate was established in 2014, and to date 14 waves of data have since been collected. Respondents to Wave 4 were contacted in March 2015, just before the general election campaign began, and those who responded to Wave 5 were contacted (as sub-samples) at some time in March-May 2015, during the campaign. Wave 11 contacted respondents in April-May 2017, before the campaign for the 2017 general election, and sub-samples were then contacted for Wave 12 during the campaign in May-June. In all of these waves, respondents were asked 'How likely do you think ... [party x] ... will win in your constituency' on a scale ranging from 0 'very unlikely to win' to 100 'very likely to win'. These responses can be interpreted as percentage odds, with a response of 50 suggesting an equal

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Figure 1:
Frequency distributions of respondents' assessments of the likelihood of each party winning in their home constituency in the 2015 pre-campaign survey



chance of winning or losing (though, of course, we cannot know whether the respondents interpreted them in this way).

Histograms of the distribution of the evaluations at the 2015 pre-campaign survey (i.e. Wave 4) suggest that in the aggregate respondents were generally aware of the four parties' chances of winning across the 59 constituencies (Figure 1). The first two – the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats – have very clear modal values of 0; a substantial number of respondents thought neither party had much chance of success locally. For the Conservatives, this reflected their weak performance in 2010 – when they won only one seat – and the lack

of any subsequent improvement. The Liberal Democrats won eleven Scottish seats in 2010 but within months of their entering a coalition with the Conservatives after that election polls showed that their support had declined by about two-thirds, which suggested that most of the seats would be unwinnable in 2015 – and the histogram indicates that this was the local respondents’ clear majority view. For Labour (note that the vertical scale on the last two histograms differs from that for the first two), which won 41 seats in 2010, the tri-modal distribution suggests a repeat; a majority of respondents’ expectations were greater than 50, but the absence of a large number recording expectations of 75 or more suggests worries that seats might be lost. The final histogram shows considerable expectations of SNP success across much of the country – reflecting what the media were reporting from the opinion polls.

The respondents’ odds percentages cannot be directly equated with the actual situation – i.e. a party’s expected margin of victory/defeat as a share of the votes cast – but a general relationship can be anticipated. Its nature is assessed here according to two separate sets of expectations. If voters assess a party’s chances of victory in a constituency according to its performance there at the previous contest, then there should be a close relationship between the outcome of that previous election and the odds percentages of victory at the next. If, on the other hand, voters are aware of changes in the likelihood of a local victory since the last election, there should be a closer relationship with the outcome at the forthcoming contest.

Expectations of an SNP victory in 2015

Table 1 addresses those two arguments for the 2015 election. The BES respondents’ expectations of an SNP victory locally have been amalgamated into six groups ranging from those where victory is unexpected (0–24), through those where the odds are close to even (40–49 and 50–59) to those where victory is considered very likely (75–100); these form the columns in the two blocks of data. In the first of those blocks the rows refer to the local outcome in 2010; in the second they refer to the actual outcome in 2015. In each case, the margins of victory-or-loss are also placed in six groups, with their borders reflecting the different outcomes (the SNP won 6 seats in 2010 and 56 in 2015).⁴ Thus in the first block of data, the first row refers to the constituencies where the SNP lost by 30 points or more in 2010: 12.1 per cent of respondents there assessed its chances of a local victory as between 0–24, whereas 40.2 assessed them as 75 or greater.

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Table 1:
Expectations of a local party victory by the result at the previous and next election in 2015

Expectation of SNP Victory 2015							
SNP Margin 2010	0–24	25–39	40–49	50–59	60–75	75–100	N
< –30	12.1	7.5	7.9	11.4	20.8	40.2	945
–29: –20	10.0	7.6	6.3	13.8	20.0	42.3	986
–19: –10	8.3	4.9	8.6	10.2	14.7	53.4	266
0: –9	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
0: +9	7.6	3.1	3.8	4.6	8.4	72.5	131
+10<	6.3	3.8	5.1	6.3	11.4	67.1	79
TOTAL	10.4	6.9	7.0	11.7	18.8	45.2	2,407
Expectation of SNP Victory 2015							
SNP Margin 2015	0–24	25–39	40–49	50–59	60–75	75–100	N
< 0	18.2	13.1	8.0	12.4	24.1	24.1	137
0: +4	14.1	10.9	7.6	13.0	18.5	35.9	92
5: +9	8.6	8.1	12.2	13.7	21.3	36.0	197
10: +14	10.3	6.7	7.6	14.1	21.7	39.6	341
15: +19	9.6	6.2	6.0	9.4	18.9	49.8	646
+20<	9.9	5.9	6.2	11.8	16.6	49.6	994
TOTAL	10.4	6.9	7.0	11.7	18.8	45.2	2,407

Each row in the table shows the percentage of respondents in that group of constituencies giving the expectation of an SNP victory shown in the column headings (with the total number of respondents shown in the final column). If a likelihood of 50 or greater is taken as an indicator that a party is considered more likely than not to win in a constituency, then a majority of respondents across all seats (75.7 per cent), as well as in each group according to the 2010 result (i.e. the various rows), expected an SNP victory in their home constituency. In general, the percentage of respondents clearly anticipating an SNP victory (i.e. a value of 75–100) should increase down the six rows for the column headed 75–100, and this was indeed the case. (There were no constituencies where the SNP lost by less than 10 percentage points in

2010.) Although the general pattern is as expected – the better the party’s performance there in 2010 the greater the odds percentage that it would win locally in 2015 – nevertheless substantial proportions of the respondents still provided values that were out-of-kilter with the outcome in 2010, let alone what the polls had been telling them about the increases in support for the SNP in the months before the general election was called. Of those living in the seats which the SNP won by a comfortable majority of 10 percentage points or more in 2010, for example, 15.2 per cent gave an odds percentage less than 50, implying that they thought the SNP was more likely to lose than win there. Such low expectations are oddly placed when compared with those of the majority of respondents living in the constituencies where the SNP performed very badly in 2010 (i.e. lost by more than 30 percentage points to the winning party): 40.2 per cent of them gave the SNP an odds percentage greater than 75 and a further 20.8 per cent an odds of 60–75. High expectations also characterised respondents in the marginal seats that the SNP won by less than 10 points in 2010: 72.5 per cent thought victory there very likely in 2015.

Relatively high expectations in the seats lost by the SNP in 2010 could reflect respondents factoring in the known surge in SNP support that the polls and the media were reporting (and the SNP itself was promoting: Curtice et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Diffley, 2017). This is evaluated in the second block of data in Table 1 where expectations are correlated with the actual outcome in each constituency. As in the previous analysis, the general pattern is as expected; the better the SNP’s performance in 2015 the greater the likelihood that respondents expected a victory there. Thus, for example, 39.3 per cent of respondents in the three constituencies where the SNP lost in 2015 gave an odds percentage of victory there of less than 50, whereas in those that it won by 20 points or more 77.8 per cent gave an odds percentage greater than 50 – and just under half gave an odds greater than 74. But again, there were anomalies; in those seats that were won by a wide margin of 20 points or more, for example, 22.0 per cent of respondents still said a defeat was more likely than a victory (i.e. an odds percentage less than 50).

Expectations of an SNP victory in 2017

The next general election was held only a little more than two years later in the same constituencies, so voters should have been well aware in 2017 of the SNP’s local prospects, whether or not they factored in the polling predictions of a substantial decline in the party’s share of the national electorate.⁵ Data from the BES Wave 11 (i.e. conducted just after the election was called in 2017 and

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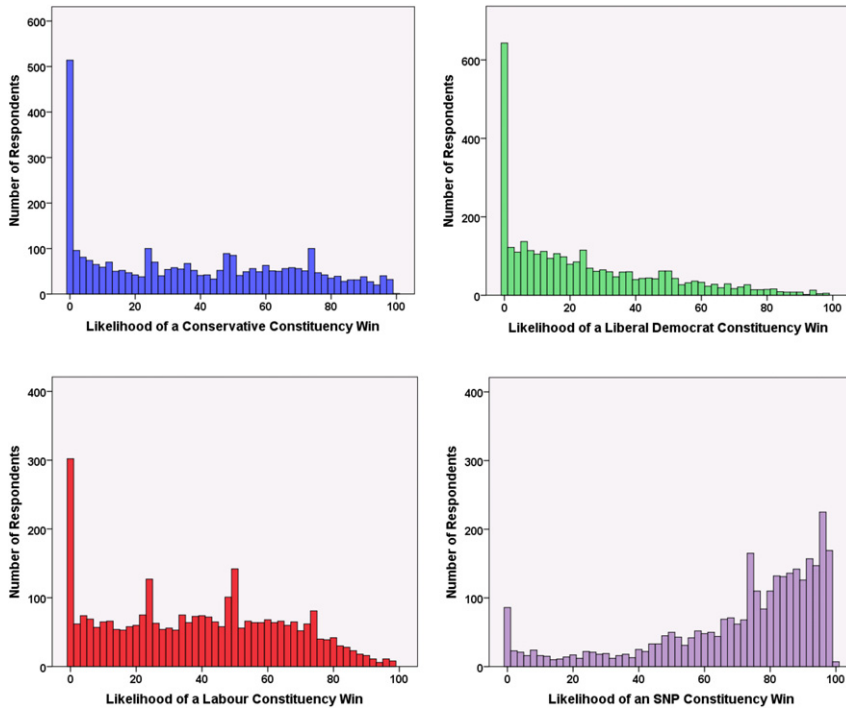
Table 2:
Expectations of a local party victory by the result at the previous and next election in 2017

Expectation of SNP Victory 2017							
SNP Margin 2015	0–24	25–39	40–49	50–59	60–75	75–100	N
< 0	19.5	11.4	16.3	14.6	17.1	21.1	123
0: +4	11.2	6.7	10.1	14.6	20.2	37.1	89
5: +9	8.8	4.4	5.9	14.7	20.6	45.6	204
10: +14	9.7	4.4	6.3	7.5	18.1	54.1	320
15: +19	9.8	2.8	4.7	4.4	19.0	59.3	642
+20<	9.0	4.2	4.8	5.3	16.0	60.6	995
TOTAL	9.9	4.3	5.9	7.0	17.7	55.2	2,373
Expectation of SNP Victory 2017							
SNP Margin 2017	0–24	25–39	40–49	50–59	60–75	75–100	N
< –20	9.9	8.9	13.9	17.8	18.8	30.7	101
–19: –10	11.8	4.6	7.8	12.4	22.2	41.2	153
–9: 0	8.7	4.0	5.5	7.0	19.4	55.3	1,291
0: +4	10.6	3.9	4.2	6.0	17.5	57.8	566
+5: +9	8.1	3.4	4.2	4.9	16.6	62.8	471
+10 <	8.6	4.3	4.8	4.8	13.9	63.6	209
TOTAL	9.2	4.1	5.4	7.0	18.3	56.0	2,791

before intensive campaigning began – the election was unexpected by all parties) are analysed in Table 2 and are generally consistent with the expected pattern.⁶ A majority of all respondents (56 per cent) said that an SNP victory in their constituency was very likely – odds of 75 or more – and there was a plurality with that view in every group of constituencies according to the 2017 outcome, although, as before, the better the outcome for the SNP the larger the percentage of local respondents who anticipated the party's victory there. (Only 30.7 per cent returned odds of 75 or more in the seats where the SNP lost by over 20 points in 2017, for example, as against 63.6 per cent in those where the SNP candidate won by 10 or more percentage points.)

Figure 2 reflects those continued high expectations regarding the SNP's fortunes leading up to the 2017 contest and the relatively bleak expectations of

Figure 2:
Frequency distributions of the respondents' assessments of the likelihood of each party winning in their home constituency in the 2017 pre-campaign survey



local success for the other three parties, for each of which the clear modal odds percentage was zero and very few returned a likelihood of 75 or greater. To the extent that one or more of them was expected to experience a resurgence of support, the distributions suggest that Labour was believed more likely than the Conservatives (on the campaigns in Scotland see Shipman, 2017, Chapter 23). As a consequence, the SNP's hegemony was considered likely to continue, with a modal odds percentage in the 70s and relatively few respondents giving an expectation for a local victory of less than 50.

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The first block in Table 2 cross-tabulates those pre-campaign (Wave 11) expectations of a local victory against the respondents' constituency outcomes in 2015. Those living in the seats the SNP won then by a margin of 20 points or more were most likely to express high expectations about another victory there, although only 60.6 per cent reported odds of over 74 and 18.0 per cent thought defeat more likely than victory (i.e. odds of less than 50). By contrast, in the three seats the SNP failed to win in 2015 nearly half of the 123 respondents thought defeat again more likely than victory – although over one-fifth (21.1 per cent) thought a victory highly likely. Was the general pattern a reflection of what happened? The final block in Table 2 cross-tabulates the Wave 11 expectations against the 2017 election outcome and shows even more anomalous results than at the previous contest. In the seats where the SNP lost by more than 20 points, a majority of the 101 respondents (67.3 per cent) thought a victory more likely than a defeat and only 9.9 per cent thought defeat very likely. Indeed, whatever the outcome – the SNP won in 35 seats and lost in 24 – a majority of respondents thought that a victory was much more likely than defeat (i.e. an expectation of victory less than 50).

These first descriptive analyses have indicated that although in general respondents were reasonably aware of the likely outcome for the SNP in their local constituency before the campaign started for each of the two elections, nevertheless there were many whose expectations were considerably out of line with both that general pattern and the actual outcome. (It was the same with voters who supported the other three parties, but those data have not been presented here.) Did the campaigns change that? Were some groups of voters (those most interested in elections, for example) more accurate in their expectations than others? And were certain types of voter – e.g. those who identify with a party – more likely to assess its likely performance accurately than others? (Taber and Lodge – 2006: 767 – for example, conclude that 'people are often unable to escape the pull of their prior attitudes and beliefs, which guide the processing of new information in predictable ... ways'.)

Campaign Impacts?

To answer those questions we suggest that: (1) those interested in the election would be more accurate in their estimates than those who were not; (2) those who identified with the party would have higher expectations in their estimates than those who did not; and (3) those who had been contacted by the party in the preceding four weeks (this is the question asked in the BES surveys) would

have higher expectations than those who were not – on the argument that if a party contacts you that probably means it thinks it has a chance of victory there.

Foreseeing the 2015 surge?

In this first evaluation we selected respondents living in the six constituencies that the SNP won in 2010 (i.e. the lowest row in the first block of Table 1) and contrasted those who evaluated the party's chances of victory in 2015 as less than 50 with those who gave an odds percentage of 75 or more. On all three comparisons, the expected differences emerged. Only 29.8 per cent of respondents who gave the odds of an SNP victory as 50 or less said that they were 'very interested' in the election, for example, compared to 60.8 per cent who gave odds of 75 or greater; the interested were better informed. Of those who gave odds of 50 or less, only 9.7 per cent identified with the SNP, compared with 39.9 per cent of those who expected another SNP victory there (odds of 75 or more); and only 9.7 per cent of those who gave odds of 50 or less had been contacted by the SNP in the weeks leading up to the survey, compared to 25.7 per cent of those who gave odds of 75 or more. Just before the 2015 campaign began, therefore, among respondents living in an SNP-held constituency those interested in the election, those who identified with the party and those who had been contacted by it were more certain about its chances of winning again in 2015 whereas the disinterested, those who didn't identify with the SNP, and those who hadn't been contacted were either less so – or wrong!

Did things change during the 2015 campaign? Among those who gave odds of 75 or more of an SNP victory in 2015 in the seats it won in 2010, unsurprisingly very few changed their position markedly. Just under half gave a higher score in the campaign (Wave 5) than in the pre-campaign (Wave 4) survey; of those who reduced the SNP's odds of a second victory, few changed their estimate by more than 10 points. For them, nothing substantial changed during the campaign. Change was much more substantial among those living in SNP-held seats who before the campaign started gave the party a less than evens chance of victory again – with one respondent changing the odds from 0 to 100. Respondents were questioned again immediately after the election (i.e. in Wave 6) and asked if they had been contacted by the parties during the campaign's last four weeks. Almost all of those who reported contact with the SNP increased their assessment of the SNP's chances between Waves 4 and 5, in most cases increasing the odds from less than to more than 50; canvassing their support led to people increasing their expectations of the party winning.

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These data suggest that those who are disinterested in an election, do not identify with a specified party, and are not contacted by it are least likely to be relatively accurate in their estimates of its chances of local success in seats where the party 'objectively' should have performed well. But what of seats where success should have been unexpected – those that the SNP lost by more than 30 percentage points in 2010 (the top row in the first block of data in Table 1)? These are the 26 seats that the SNP was least likely to win but, given the surge in its support, it achieved victory in all but one. As the first block of data in Table 1 shows, 71.4 per cent of respondents there gave it a more than evens chance of victory before the campaign began and we expected that these would be the people more interested in the election, those who identified with the SNP, and those contacted by it. All three expectations were confirmed: of those who gave the SNP a victory expectation of 75 points or more, 72.9 were very interested in the election, compared with 56.5 per cent of those who gave odds of 50 or less; similarly, of those in the first category, 38.2 per cent identified with the SNP compared to 17.3 per cent of those in the second category; and 33.0 per cent of those who gave the SNP a less than evens chance of a local victory had been contacted by the party in the previous four weeks compared to 61.4 per cent of those who gave the SNP an odds-on chance of winning. Of those who gave the SNP odds of a local victory of less than 50 before the campaign, four-fifths increased those odds by the time they were questioned during the campaign. Among those reporting that they were contacted during the campaign (i.e. during Wave 5) their odds of an SNP victory locally increased by an average of 32.8 points, compared to 14.8 for those who were not. Again, it appears that the information provided to people when they were canvassed by the party led to them increasing their expectations that it would win locally.

Anticipating the 2017 SNP decline?

The SNP's surge in 2015 was followed by a substantial fall in support two years later. At most UK elections, a party which won a constituency by between 10 and 20 percentage points at one contest could expect to hold it again at the next. The SNP won 22 seats by such a margin in 2015, but lost 10 of them two years later; what were the expectations there? The final row in the first block in Table 2 shows that the great majority of respondents expected an SNP victory again; over half gave an odds of 75 or more. Among them, over 64.6 per cent said they were very interested in the election as against 51.1 per cent of those who gave the odds of a further SNP victory in their constituency as less than 50;

and 35.9 per cent of the group who thought another SNP victory very likely identified with the SNP, more than twice the 16.5 per cent of those who gave odds of less than 50 – further suggesting that at least some of those with high expectations of a further SNP victory locally were motivated by their strong partisanship for the party. Regarding contact, at the start of the campaign of those who had been contacted by any of the parties among those giving odds of 75 or more 38.3 per cent had been contacted by the SNP in the previous four weeks, whereas 27.4 per cent had been contacted by the Conservatives, 22.7 per cent by Labour and 14.4 by the Liberal Democrats; among those who gave odds of 50 or less the respective percentages were 26.1, 22.7, 21.0 and 11.4. Those who saw defeat as likely had more contact from the other parties relative to the SNP. Similar differences were reported after the election, when again respondents were asked about contact in the preceding four weeks. Among those expecting another SNP win in their constituency, 60.6 per cent had been contacted by the SNP, 42.4 per cent by the Conservatives, 38.8 per cent by Labour and 28.5 per cent by the Liberal Democrats. The corresponding percentages among those with low expectations of an SNP victory were 36.9, 34.7, 31.3 and 21.6.

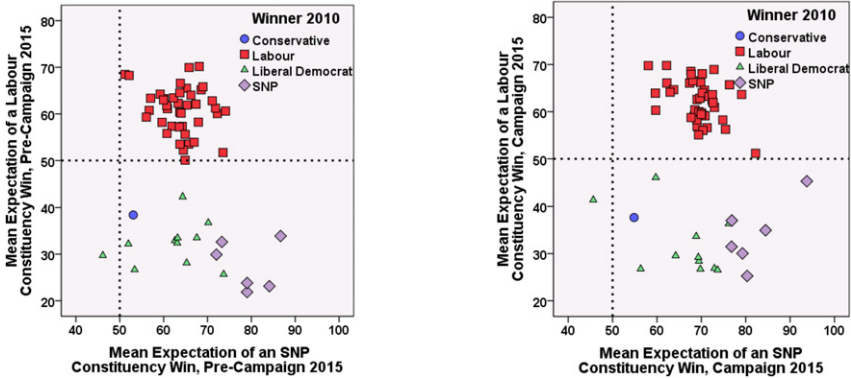
These data show that, with regard to the SNP's local performances in both 2015 and 2017, local voters were in general well aware of the party's prospects in their home constituencies. Where the party had performed well at the previous election, they were more likely to rate its chances of victory higher than were those living in constituencies where it performed less well. Further, changes in SNP support between the contests also influenced the evaluations; some voters, at least, were tracking the party's prospects and adjusting their evaluations of the outcome accordingly. But there were considerable variations in those assessments. Those who were more interested in politics were more likely to be 'accurate' in their evaluations of the likely local outcome than those who were less interested – as were those who identified with the party compared with those who did not. Furthermore, the SNP's canvassing for support during the last weeks of the campaign influenced how voters responded to the party's local prospects; those contacted appeared to assume that the SNP had a good chance of winning locally and adjusted their estimates of that occurring accordingly.

Inter-party competition

In making their estimates of each party's chances of victory in their home constituency, respondents were not necessarily playing a zero-sum game so

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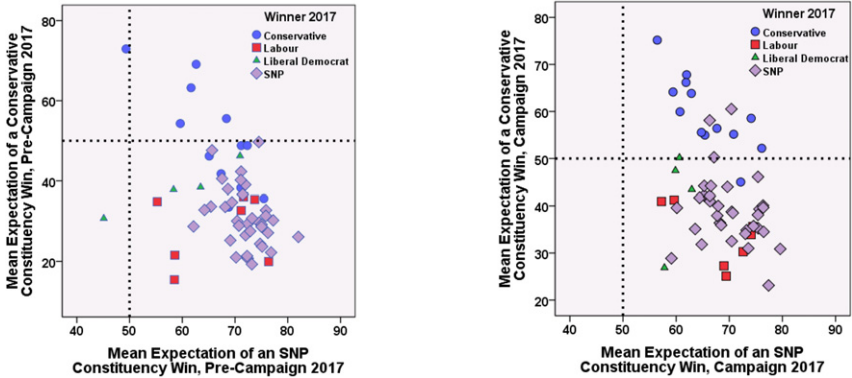
Figure 3:
Mean expectations of SNP and Labour wins in constituencies at the 2015 election
in the (a) pre-campaign and (b) campaign surveys



that, for example, if they estimated the SNP's chances there as 70, then the sum of their estimates for the other three parties could not exceed 30. They might express their uncertainty by giving more than one party a chance of victory exceeding 50. Two examples illustrate this. In the first (Figure 3[a]) the mean expectation of an SNP victory for each of the 59 constituencies in the 2015 pre-campaign survey is graphed against the comparable mean for a Labour victory. Labour won 41 seats at the previous contest in 2010, and in all of those constituencies respondents gave them a more than evens chance of victory again, compared to much lower odds in the 18 where they lost in 2010. Expectations were higher where the party traditionally performed well. But in all of the Labour-held seats respondents also gave the SNP a more-than-evens chance of victory – in most of them averaging around 65. Expectations of an SNP victory were generally greatest where Labour lost in 2010; elsewhere, voters were, in effect, undecided whether either Labour would win again or the seat would be lost in the SNP surge. Very little changed during the campaign: Figure 3[b] shows, using the Wave 5 campaign data, that, in general, in the seats Labour won in 2010 mean expectations for both a Labour and an SNP victory in 2015 increased slightly.

The second example is for the contest between the SNP and the Conservatives in 2017. Before the campaign began the mean expectation

Figure 4:
Mean Expectations of SNP and Conservative wins in constituencies at the 2017 election in the (a) pre-campaign and (b) campaign surveys



was of an SNP victory (i.e. odds of 50 or greater) in all but two of the constituencies – those won by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats respectively in 2015 (Figure 4[a]). There were four where the odds of a Conservative victory were placed above 50 on average, alongside an average of 60 or more for an SNP victory there; all those seats were won by the Conservatives in 2017, as were three others where the odds were assessed as just below 50. In general, voters were aware of where the Conservatives were most likely to displace the SNP. This became even clearer during the campaign (Figure 4[b]) when odds greater than 50 were assessed for all but one of the seats that the Conservatives eventually won – and there were only two constituencies where the SNP won despite odds of a Conservative win exceeding 50. (There were also approximately even chances of a Conservative victory in seats won by the Liberal Democrats.)

In both examples, therefore, although before the campaign began respondents gave relatively high assessments of the chances of the previous victor winning again (Labour in 2015 and SNP in 2017) they also were able to identify the likely alternative winner. Further, in both cases the likely outcome was clarified during the campaign. Similar situations occurred with regard to the seats won from the SNP by Labour and the Liberal Democrats in 2017, especially the latter; Labour's victories then were more unexpected.

Predicting campaign effects

According to these arguments, survey respondents might re-assess the odds of a party winning in their constituency during an election campaign as a consequence of the general campaign mood, as expressed through the media (drawing considerably on opinion polls), and the intensity of local canvassing. Much research has shown that voters contacted by a party during British general election campaigns are more likely to turn out and vote for it (although there is an endogeneity effect – those contacted are likely to be the party's supporters: Johnston *et al.*, 2012; Pattie *et al.*, 2015). Here we argue that those contacted by a party are more likely to consider it likely to win in their constituency than those not contacted – contact indicating that a party has reasonable expectations of a local victory (parties rarely expend much time, money and other resources canvassing support in seats they know they are going to lose: Johnston and Pattie, 2014).

To test this argument, we conducted separate regression analyses of respondents' expectations of each party winning in their local constituency in 2017 – when the outcome across the constituencies was more variable than in 2015 – in both the pre-campaign and campaign surveys. Those expectations are the dependent variables; the key independents are whether they were contacted during the previous four weeks by each of the four parties and which party was the eventual local winner. Two other variables are included as controls. The first is the party's margin of victory/defeat at the 2015 election, calculated as the difference in percentage share of the votes cast between it and the second-placed party if it won there in 2015 and between it and the winning party if it lost (i.e. a negative value if the party lost there in 2015 and a positive value if it won). The second is whether the respondent identified with the party. (We also explored whether interest in the election was linked to the evaluations, but the lack of any significant relationships in an initial exploration suggested this was not the case so that variable was excluded.) Contact was determined by answers to questions regarding whether respondents had been contacted during the previous four weeks by any of the parties, and if so which. Finally, we included a variable indicating whether the party won in the constituency in 2017, exploring whether respondents were on average sufficiently aware of the likely victor in their home constituency to give it greater odds of success there.

The regression results are all in line with expectations (Table 3), although the low R^2 values (not unusual for analyses of such survey data) suggest considerable random variation – again not surprising given the use of a 0–100

Table 3:
Regressions of expectations of each party winning the local constituency in the pre-campaign and campaign surveys before the 2017 election (coefficients significant at the 0.05 level or better are shown in bold)

	Con	Lab	LD	SNP
<i>Pre-Campaign</i>				
Constant	52.18	48.47	45.23	56.50
Margin2015	0.59	0.52	0.57	0.38
Identifier	15.58	11.76	11.73	10.66
Contacted by				
Conservative	2.99	-3.26	-2.48	1.65
Labour	-1.81	5.05	-0.22	-2.53
Liberal Democrat	2.59	-3.46	6.68	1.48
SNP	-1.33	-1.85	-1.14	3.22
Party Won in 2017	4.91	7.71	8.49	2.85
R ²	0.18	0.14	0.26	0.07
<i>Campaign</i>				
Constant	56.73	51.40	44.67	58.86
Margin2015	0.46	0.52	0.57	0.20
Identifier	12.13	12.39	7.81	11.51
Contacted by				
Conservative	5.57	-3.59	-2.99	-1.06
Labour	-0.97	7.86	-0.96	-0.03
Liberal Democrat	-2.63	-0.92	7.59	-0.58
SNP	-4.85	-4.67	-1.13	5.84
Party Won in 2017	9.19	4.65	12.70	2.63
R ²	0.16	0.13	0.28	0.06
<i>Campaign (Post-Campaign Contact)</i>				
Constant	57.02	52.09	45.52	56.62
Margin2015	0.45	0.51	0.58	0.23
Identifier	12.08	11.89	8.12	11.42

Continued

Predicting election outcomes

Table 3: Continued

	Con	Lab	LD	SNP
Contacted by				
Conservative	6.68	-4.75	-3.06	-1.61
Labour	-2.71	7.48	0.97	-1.06
Liberal Democrat	-2.48	-3.73	4.86	1.14
SNP	-4.54	-3.30	-2.21	7.86
Party Won in 2017	9.12	4.98	13.39	2.87
R ²	0.16	0.13	0.28	0.06

scale for the dependent variable, which calls for a degree of precision that few respondents were able to deploy.⁷

The first block of regressions in Table 3 relates to the 2017 pre-campaign (Wave 11) survey. All four variables representing the relevant party's margin of victory/defeat in 2015 are both positive and statistically significant: as expected, the better a party's performance in 2015 the greater the average expectation of its victory in 2017. The coefficients for whether the respondent identified with the relevant party are also all statistically significant and relatively large, averaging some 12.5 points on the 0–100 scale, indicating that voters who identify with a party are on average more optimistic about its prospects than those who do not. (There is potential endogeneity here; people may be more likely to identify with a party in places where it is more likely to win. Or it might – as in the Belgian study (Stiers and Dassonneville, 2018) – reflect 'wishful thinking' by a party's committed supporters.)

Turning to the contact variables, a respondent who had been contacted by any of the parties during the previous four weeks was more likely to assess that party's chances of a local victory by as many as several points higher than those not contacted. Each of the three parties contesting seats currently held by the SNP had its chances of a local victory rated higher if respondents there had been contacted by the relevant party than if they had not; in addition, those contacted by the Conservatives on average rated both Labour's and the Liberal Democrats' local chances lower than did those ignored by Conservative canvassers. Contact from the SNP significantly increased the assessed likelihood of its success but did not significantly lower its opponents' perceived chances.

Finally in this first block of regressions, the four coefficients for whether the relevant party won in 2017 are all both positive and statistically significant. In general, therefore, respondents were aware of which seats each party was

more likely to win, rating their chances more highly there than in those where they were destined to lose – though this was of course not known at the time. The largest of those coefficients were for Labour and the Liberal Democrats, suggesting that respondents were clearer at the start of the campaign where their prospects were greater than they were for either the Conservatives or the SNP. (Five of the constituencies where the Conservatives came second to the SNP in 2017 were won by the latter with majorities of 5 percentage points or less, making estimates of which party would win there very difficult. Similarly, the SNP lost by 5 points or less in seven constituencies then and won in 15 by less than that margin – indeed, by less than one percentage point in 8. Predicting such outcomes accurately would be very difficult for voters, however well-informed.)

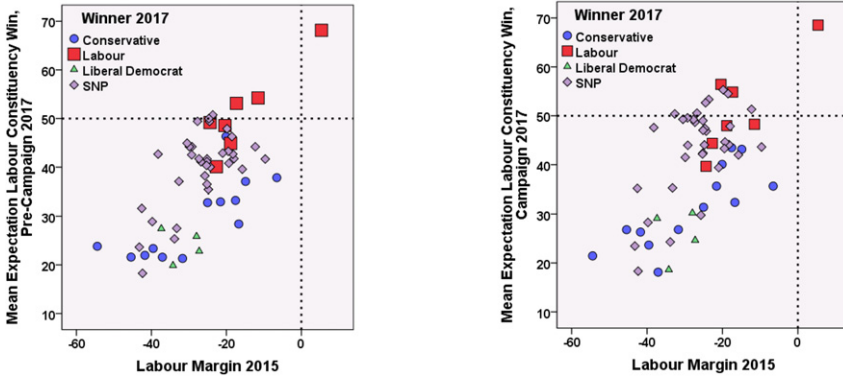
The second set of regressions in Table 3 uses the data on expectations and contact provided during the campaign itself, with very similar results to those for the pre-campaign situation. Of particular interest is the increased size of the coefficients for the final variable for both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. This suggests that as the campaign proceeded local residents became clearer which seats they would win – in the case of the Liberal Democrats giving an average evaluation 12.7 points larger on the 0–100 scale in the four seats that the party eventually won than in those that it lost. Respondents were less sure which seats Labour and the SNP would win, however: those coefficients were substantially lower (4.65 and 2.73 respectively) than those for the Conservative (9.19) and Liberal Democrat (12.70) parties.

One difficulty with analysis of the campaign data is that some respondents were interviewed early in the five-week period and others much later; the latter were probably more likely to have been influenced by the campaign than the former. To assess whether this was the case we conducted regressions with the timing of their interview included as a further variable, which was also interacted with the contact variables: no statistically significant or substantial findings emerged (these results are not reported here). We also conducted further regressions using the responses to the contact questions asked in the post-election survey (Wave 13), which refer to the last four weeks of the campaign. These are reported in the final block of Table 3, with very similar findings to those in the second block; contact had an impact and local respondents were better able to identify the seats that the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were going to gain than either those which Labour would win or the SNP would retain.

The finding in all of those regressions that on average respondents assessed a party's chances of winning in 2017 as higher in those constituencies where

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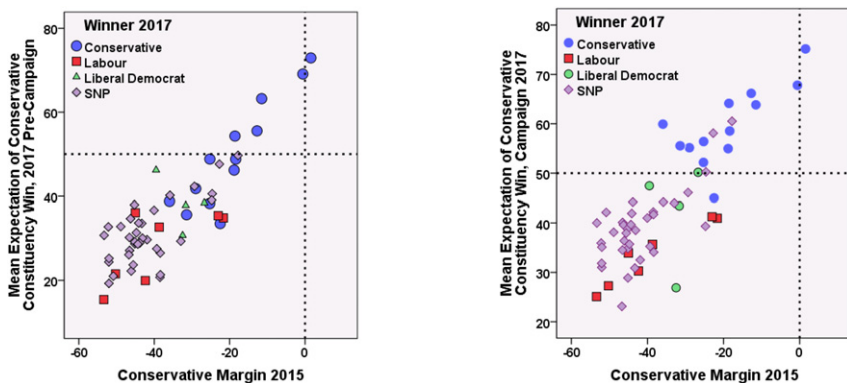
Figure 5:
Mean expectations of a Labour constituency victory, graphed against its margin of victory/defeat in 2015, in the (a) pre-campaign and (b) campaign 2017 surveys



it was eventually successful than in those where it was not suggests reasonable appreciation of the geography of change across constituencies at an election where that change was both considerable and spatially variable both between and within parties. The extent to which this occurred is illustrated in a further series of graphs.

Figure 5[a] shows the mean pre-campaign survey expectation of a 2017 Labour victory in each of the 59 constituencies according to its performance there in 2015. Labour won only one seat in 2015 and seven seats in 2017. The mean expectation of success in the one already held was high, at just under 70. Two of the six that it eventually won also had mean expectations greater than 50; for two more they were just below 50; and for the remaining two it was slightly less. There were, however, many others where the expectation of a Labour victory was assessed at 40 or greater but which the SNP won; on the other hand, the mean expectation of a Labour victory was below 40 in all of the seats won by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. Relatively little changed during the campaign, as shown in Figure 5[b]. Expectations remained at 40 or greater in all six seats that Labour won; its chances there were considered much greater than those of either the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats but those seats could not be distinguished clearly from the ones where it lost to the SNP again.

Figure 6:
Mean expectations of a Conservative constituency victory, graphed against its margin of victory/defeat in 2015, in the (a) pre-campaign and (b) campaign 2017 surveys

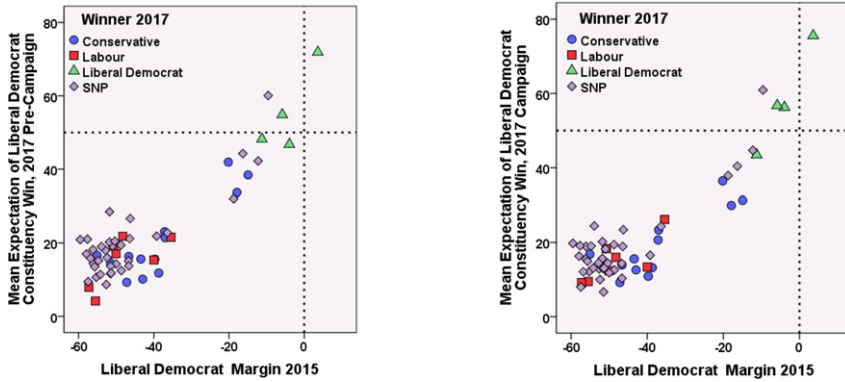


Respondents were even clearer in identifying many of the seats where the Conservatives won in 2017. The party eventually won in all five seats where the pre-campaign expectations of a Conservative win exceeded 50, and it won a further three where the expectations were just below that level (Figure 6[a]). Further, in very few cases was there a relatively high (above c.40) expectation of a Conservative victory in seats that the SNP won again, but the Conservatives were given relatively high expectations in seats eventually won by the Liberal Democrats. (Much of the media discussion then and during the campaign was about the surge in support for the Conservatives, with much less about the Liberal Democrats' revival in a few seats.) During the campaign, respondents became even clearer regarding the seats that the Conservatives were going to win (Figure 6[b]). The mean expectation of a Conservative success exceeded 50 in all but one of the thirteen seats eventually won, and a similar mean expectation characterised just two of the seats retained by the SNP.

Local residents were even clearer regarding the likelihood of a Liberal Democrat victory before the campaign began. They were clearly expected to hold on to the single seat won in 2015 and there were relatively high expectations of a win in a small number of others, including the three that the party eventually gained from the SNP (Figure 7[a]); expectations in almost all of the other seats were very low. This pattern was clarified during the campaign

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Figure 7:
Mean expectations of a Liberal Democrat constituency victory, graphed against its margin of victory/defeat in 2015, in the (a) pre-campaign and (b) campaign 2017 surveys



(Figure 7[b]); there was just one seat where the expectation of a Liberal Democrat victory exceeded 50 but it was retained by the SNP.

Finally, before the campaign started in 2017 expectations of an SNP victory were high in almost all seats, exceeding 50 in all but two – those won by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats respectively in 2015 (Figure 8[a]). There was a clear appreciation that the SNP was quite likely to lose in those seats won in 2015 by a margin of 10 points or less, however, and two of the seats lost to Labour also had relatively low expectations of an SNP victory. But across the large majority of the seats won by the SNP in 2015 by a margin of 10–20 points there was no clear distinction between those that it won again and those that would be lost to one of the three competitors. Little changed during the campaign; expectations of an SNP victory remained around 70 points in many of the seats lost to either of the Conservatives or Labour (Figure 8[b]) – only in the four seats won by the Liberal Democrats were the expectations of an SNP victory relatively low, though still above 60.

Further exploration of these data again show that the respondents were not playing zero-sum games – for most the sum of their expectations across all four parties exceeded 100. This is illustrated in Figure 9[a], which plots the mean expectation of an SNP victory in each constituency in the 2017 campaign wave against the mean for a Conservative victory. In all 59 cases the mean

Figure 8:
Mean expectations of an SNP constituency victory, graphed against its margin of victory/defeat in 2015, in the (a) pre-campaign and (b) campaign 2017 surveys

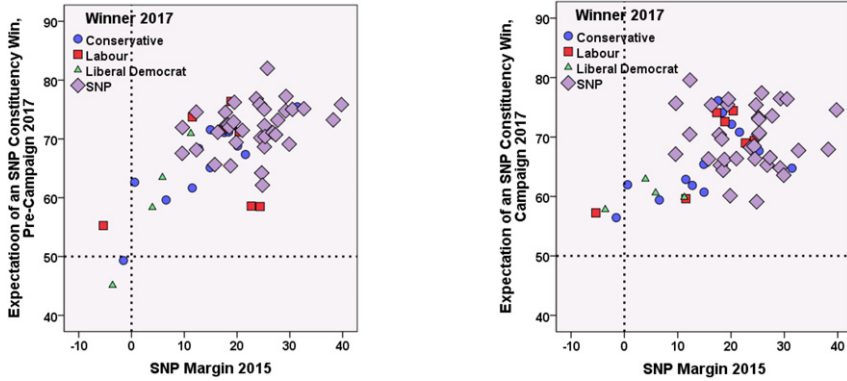
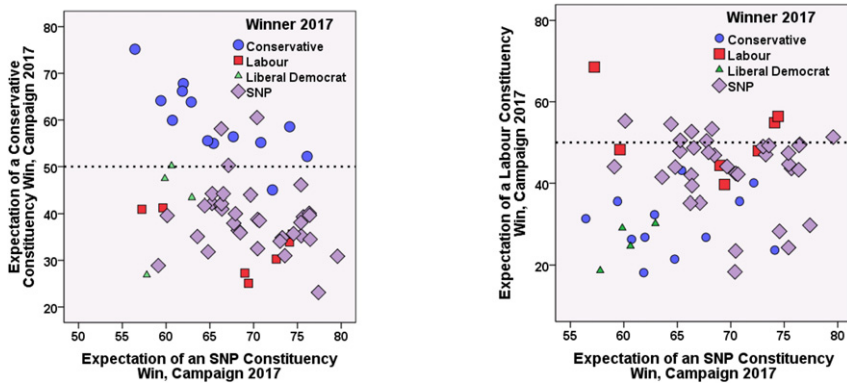


Figure 9:
Mean expectations of (a) a Conservative constituency victory and (b) a Labour constituency victory against the mean expectation of an SNP constituency victory in the 2017 campaign survey



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expectation of an SNP victory exceeds 50, as it also does for the Conservatives in 12 of the 13 seats that they won. Local residents believed that another SNP victory was likely in those seats, therefore, but also that the Conservatives had a reasonable chance of winning there – better than in almost all of the other constituencies, where the respondents gave the Conservatives a likelihood of victory of less than 50. (Such uncertainty was understandable: the SNP won 17 of its 35 seats in 2017 with less than 40 per cent of the votes, and eight of them by a majority of less than one percentage point: Johnston et al., 2017.) Further, there were only four seats (three won by the SNP and one by the Liberal Democrats) where the mean expectation of a Conservative victory exceeded 50, but the seat was not won.

In effect, therefore, respondents were ‘hedging their bets’. Those living in the seats that the Conservatives won in 2017 were more likely to assess that party’s chances of a local victory there higher than were respondents in other constituencies; they were aware of the geography of the surge of support for the Conservatives but they still thought another SNP victory quite likely – giving it a mean expectation of more than 55 in each case and more than 60 in most. Local respondents also assessed the Liberal Democrats’ chances of a local victory higher in the four seats that it won than in almost all others, but in three of the four cases also gave a mean expectation greater than 60 for an SNP victory. But there was much less clarity locally with regard to the seven seats that Labour won (Figure 9[b]). The Conservative and Liberal Democrats victories were much more anticipated locally than were Labour’s.

Conclusions

Our analyses largely confirm the findings of the emerging literature on ‘citizen forecasting’. Citizens’ predictions of the likely outcomes of elections in their constituencies are generally accurate, though some are more accurate in their predictions than others. But we take the argument further by considering the influence of both the local electoral context and parties’ own campaign activities on the accuracy of voters’ predictions. Both prove important parts of the overall picture.

It is not surprising that most British voters can accurately predict which party will win in their home constituency at a forthcoming general election since the great majority of constituencies are safe for one of the parties which is unlikely to have to yield its incumbency there. But when the outcome is uncertain because of substantial changes in the electoral fortunes of one or more parties then local residents may be less clear on the likely outcome. In this paper, we

have explored residents' evaluations of each of four parties' likelihood of winning in their home constituencies at the 2015 and 2017 General Elections in Scotland, both of which were characterised by very substantial changes between contests in two or more parties' shares of the votes cast and number of seats won. At the 2015 election, the SNP's share of the votes more than doubled from the previous contest, and its number of seats increased more than eight-fold. That surge was widely forecast in the media before and during the campaign, and most BES respondents were clearly aware of it.

Two years later, the SNP's vote share was reduced by almost one-third overall, but by much more in some constituencies than others. Again, the likelihood of this shift was widely appreciated by the media both before and increasingly during the campaign, but respondents were less clear whether it would have an impact in their home constituency; they thought a further SNP victory there more likely than not. The beneficiary of the decline in SNP support varied across constituencies, with each of its three competitors winning some seats. In general, respondents were aware which of those parties was more likely to be the major beneficiary locally, and that awareness was clarified during the campaign, although the local advances made by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties were more clearly appreciated than were those of the Labour party – and they were also less certain in which seats the SNP would perform relatively badly. Contacts from the parties' canvassers were instrumental in that clarification: respondents contacted by a party during the campaign on average rated its chances of success in a constituency as greater than did those not contacted – and in addition those who identified with a party on average rated its chances of success locally higher than those who did not.

In general, therefore, Scottish voters were certainly not unaware of both the national and local trends in party support at those two contests when party vote shares and occupancy of parliamentary seats changed very substantially. But where the extent of the change locally was uncertain – which was the case in 2017 much more than in 2015 – that was reflected in their expectations; they tended to 'hedge their bets' in 2017, in most cases by giving relatively high expectations of a further SNP victory but also expectations greater than evens of victory by the opposition party considered most likely to win there. On average, they were aware of the general trends but not – and probably unsurprisingly so given the final outcome in many constituencies – of their particular trajectory in individual constituencies. But the analyses show considerable variability around such averages with some voters, especially those not interested in the election, those who do not identify with a party, and those whose support was not canvassed during the campaign less likely

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to provide relatively accurate estimates of each party's local performance. Even where there was considerable change in the local electoral situation, therefore, these analyses have provided largely positive answers to the questions posed: voters were generally aware of which parties had the best chances of success locally, an awareness that was crystallised during the campaign as more information was provided on which they based their evaluations, but given the closeness of the outcome in a substantial number of seats that many voters predicted the wrong winner is unsurprising. Nevertheless, the more information they were provided by the parties that canvassed their support the more likely it was that voters would, correctly, expect it to win locally: information mattered in that electoral decision-making.

Notes

1. The opinion poll data and seat estimates were produced by <http://www.electoralcalculus.co.uk/polls17.html>.
2. See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/scottish-independence-referendum-indyref-2-nicola-sturgeon-vote-date-latest-a7654591.html>.
3. The opinion poll data were obtained from the same source as those for 2015; the estimated seat tallies came from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom_general_election,_2017.
4. Given the non-normal distributions shown in Figure 1, summary statistics were not viable as indicators of variations.
5. Several forecasters published estimates of the outcome in every constituency on the web, but the number of voters who either accessed these data or had their attention drawn to them by either the media or the political parties is unknown. In any case, as with the polls discussed above, all three over-estimated the number of seats the SNP would win – 47, 51 and 51 respectively (Johnston et al, 2018).
6. The different Ns in the two parts of this table reflect differences in the number of missing observations for the relevant variables.
7. In general, the higher the degree of measurement error in a variable the larger the standard errors of estimates and hence the smaller the likelihood of finding a significant relationship (see Blackwell et al., 2017).

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